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Abyei: Sudan's Next Test

Activist Brief

By Colin Thomas-Jensen and Maggie Fick July 2009

This week's legal decision on the boundary of Abyei—an oil-rich and contested region along the disputed North-South border within Sudan—is the first major test of recent commitments made in Washington by the two parties to Sudan's 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement, or CPA. In Enough's latest strategy paper, co-authors Colin Thomas-Jensen and Maggie Fick argue that the international community—in particular the United States, which played a critical role in negotiating the Abyei Protocol—has a responsibility to ensure that the ruling is respected and that the residents of Abyei and the affected surrounding areas are protected from violence.

The ruling on Abyei will occur against a backdrop of increasingly hostile relations between Sudan's ruling National Congress Party, or NCP, and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement, or SPLM, over a number of unimplemented CPA provisions, including stalled preparations for the general elections in April 2010 and the referendum on southern self-determination, scheduled for 2011. The willingness of both parties to accept and implement the results of arbitration on the disputed Abyei region this week is a crucial litmus test of each side's will to implement the CPA, and, by extension, a barometer for the efficacy of the Obama administration's strategy on Sudan.

Enough argues that the diplomatic push from the international community to secure renewed commitment from the Sudanese parties on CPA implementation is welcome, and focusing on Abyei is an important step in making these commitments real in the lives of ordinary Sudanese. A multilateral effort that combines increased short-term security provisions with diplomacy and international aid to reach a durable political solution to the Abyei dispute is necessary to defuse the Abyei conflict and prevent a return to all out war.

Enough's recommendations

Given the United States' crucial role in negotiating the Abyei Protocol during the peace process that led to the CPA, Enough urges the Obama administration to play a lead role in the following actions:

1. Bolster the UN peacekeeping force, or UNMIS, in Abyei and increase support to police units and establish a greater civilian presence to help prevent violence in the Abyei region.
2. Maintain a high-level diplomatic presence in Abyei until real commitments and activities toward implementation of the Abyei Protocol are under way
3. Encourage a plan for full public dissemination and public education about the Tribunal's decision.
4. Pressure the parties to establish a plan for border demarcation and follow it up.
5. Urge the parties to initiate security plans and reconstruction projects that will benefit the residents of Abyei and those that seasonally migrate through the area.

The upcoming ruling represents an opportunity to promote sustained peace and development in one of the most volatile areas along the disputed border. However, Abyei will continue to be a flashpoint, and sustained attention, including negotiations between the parties on long-term wealth-sharing arrangements related to Abyei's oil reserves, are the only way to mitigate the risk that Abyei will unravel the North-South peace.